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Game Results

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Special Events

Tournament Schedule

Tournament Results

Bridge Articles

Bridge Books

Bridge Links

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Overcalls Showing Two Suits

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Introduction

In the article on [simple overcalls](#), we recommended that a simple overcall show a hand that **has only one suit** that looks suitable as a trump suit. When you have two suits that look suitable, you normally make one of the special overcalls described in this article.

This article describes the two most common conventions used to describe two-suited hands. However, be aware that there are some hands that do not have a two-suited overcall available (depending on which suit opener has bid, and which two suits you hold). Also, there are some hands where you can make a two-suited overcall but partner will not know the identity of one of the suits. These two drawbacks can be overcome by using an **optional convention** discussed later.

Caution: The bids and responses described in this article require partnership agreement and understanding.

Additional Caution: This may sound a bit insulting, but I've seen it happen. Do not make a two-suited overcall when one of your suits has been bid by the opponents.

When To Make A Two-Suited Overcall

There are two factors that determine when to make a two-suited overcall:

1. The distribution of your hand. Obviously, you must have two suits that look suitable as a trump suit.
2. The strength of your hand.

Distribution

Your hand is a candidate for a two-suited overcall if you hold two suits, each of which has five cards or more.

With partnership agreement and understanding, one of your suits may have only four cards. However, you and your partner must be prepared for an increased likelihood of both good and bad scores.

Strength

When considering a two-suited overcall, determine which strength category your hand falls into:

- **Weak:** A hand with less than 10 high card points.
- **Intermediate:** A hand with 10 to 15 high card points.
- **Strong:** A hand with 16 high card points or more.

You make a two-suited overcall with a hand that is **either weak or strong**. You do not normally make an overcall with an intermediate-strength hand (we'll discuss that further at the end of this article).

How does partner know which type of hand you have (weak or strong)? That's easy. You start by making the appropriate two-suited overcall. With the weak hand, **do not bid again**. Partner is totally in charge. With the strong hand, you may bid again even if partner has passed. We'll see examples later in this article.

Opening Bid And Table Position

You normally make a two-suited overcall in **direct seat only** (that is, immediately following the opening bid). A previous pass by you does not affect this position: once an opening bid is made, you are in direct seat if you are immediately after the opening bid.

In certain cases, these bids can apply when you are in the **balancing seat**. You are in the balancing seat when the person to your left opens the bidding, and both your partner and opener's partner pass. Refer to the article on [Balancing After An Opening Bid](#) for guidelines in this position.

This article is limited to two-suited overcalls that follow an opening bid of one of a suit. Refer to the following articles for guidelines in other cases:

- [Bidding over opponent's 1NT opening](#).
- [Bidding over opponent's preempt](#) (either a weak two, or a three-level opening).

Example Hands

Here are some example hands that illustrate when and when not to make a two-suited overcall. We'll discuss the actual bids you make in later sections; for now, all you need to know is how to recognize a suitable hand:

Example 1

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North
1♣

East
??

South

West

You're sitting East with each of the following hands:

♠ Q J 9 7 3
♥ A J 8 4 3
♦ 4 3
♣ 4

This hand can make a two-suited overcall. You have two suits that are each five cards long, and you have a weak hand (less than 10 points).

♠ A K 9 7 3
♥ A K J 4 3
♦ K 3
♣ 4

This hand can make a two-suited overcall. You have two suits that are each five cards long, and you have a strong hand (16 points or more).

♠ A 10 8 7 3
♥ A K 8 4 3
♦ Q 3
♣ 4

This hand should not make a two-suited overcall. You have the required distribution (two five-card suits), but your hand is intermediate in strength (between 10 and 15 points). You will still bid with this hand, but not with a two-suited overcall. Patience: we'll cover this at the end.

How Do I Make A Two-Suited Overcall?

The bid you make to show a two-suited overcall is determined by two things:

1. What is opener's suit?

2. What suits do you hold?

The following table will give the **name** of the bid you make; these bids will then be described with text and examples. The shaded cells show areas where you need to pay particular attention.

| Opener's Suit | Your Suits | Your Bid |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Clubs | Diamonds and Hearts | Unusual Notrump |
| | Diamonds and Spades | no bid available |
| | Hearts and Spades | Michaels |
| Diamonds | Clubs and Hearts | Unusual Notrump |
| | Clubs and Spades | no bid available |
| | Hearts and Spades | Michaels |
| Hearts | Clubs and Diamonds | Unusual Notrump |
| | Spades and Clubs | Michaels |
| | Spades and Diamonds | Michaels |
| Spades | Clubs and Diamonds | Unusual Notrump |
| | Hearts and Clubs | Michaels |
| | Hearts and Diamonds | Michaels |

Let's summarize this table with the following general statements (which are easier to remember):

- **Unusual Notrump:** This always shows the two lower ranking unbid suits, regardless of which suit opener has bid. Over a major suit opening, it shows both minors. Over a minor suit opening, it shows **hearts** plus the other minor. **The unusual notrump never shows spades.**
- **Michaels:** This **normally** shows the two higher ranking unbid suits. Over a minor suit opening, it shows both majors. Over a major suit opening, it shows the other major plus one of the minors. There is a bid your partner can make to discover which minor suit you hold; we'll discuss that a bit later.

Optional Convention

There is an additional bid available which can (by partnership agreement) show a two-suited hand. It helps with the cases shown by the shaded cells in the previous table:

1. It provides for a bid in those cases where a two-suited overcall is not available.
2. It clarifies the situation where Michaels shows a minor suit.

You can totally ignore this optional convention, and not feel too badly about it. However, if you and your partner are comfortable with trying something new, give it a whirl and see what happens. You can always drop

it later if it causes too many problems.

So what is this convention anyway? It's called "Ghestem". It actually started out as a complete bidding system, but only one of the bids in that system is generally used. That bid is a weak jump overcall in clubs (3♣) over **any one-level opening bid of a suit (including clubs)** to show a specific pair of suits.

If you use this convention, you give up the opportunity to make a weak jump overcall in clubs, because the 3♣ bid now shows a specific type of two-suited hand. However, the benefit you gain is that you can **fully describe all two-suited hands in one bid**. Players who use this convention feel that this benefit significantly outweighs the loss.

Ghestem is used in the same way as other two-suited overcalls in terms of distribution and strength requirements.

Caution: If you use Ghestem, you must alert it. If the opponents ask for an explanation, you must state the two suits partner is showing (see below), and also explain that it shows either a weak or a strong hand.

Let's revise the previous table to show where Ghestem is used (the applicable parts of the table are shaded):

| Opener's Suit | Your Suits | Your Bid |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Clubs | Diamonds and Hearts | Unusual Notrump |
| | Diamonds and Spades | Ghestem |
| | Hearts and Spades | Michaels |
| Diamonds | Clubs and Hearts | Unusual Notrump |
| | Clubs and Spades | Ghestem |
| | Hearts and Spades | Michaels |
| Hearts | Clubs and Diamonds | Unusual Notrump |
| | Spades and Clubs | Ghestem |
| | Spades and Diamonds | Michaels |
| Spades | Clubs and Diamonds | Unusual Notrump |
| | Hearts and Clubs | Ghestem |
| | Hearts and Diamonds | Michaels |

The summary now becomes even easier:

- **Unusual Notrump:** This always shows the **two lower ranking** unbid suits, regardless of which suit opener has bid.
- **Michaels:** This always shows the **two higher ranking** unbid suits, regardless of which suit opener has bid.
- **Ghestem:** This always shows the **highest and lowest ranking** unbid suits, regardless of which suit opener has bid.

Stop Here!

Before you read any further, I have an unfortunate announcement to make. **You must memorize this section (with or without Ghestem) before you go any further.** If you aren't sure what the various two-suited overcalls show in the way of suits, you will be hopelessly confused by the rest of this article.

Unusual Notrump

The unusual notrump is an overcall of 2NT in direct seat to show a two-suited hand (as described above).

- Over a major suit opening, it always shows both minor suits.
- Over a minor suit opening, it always shows hearts and the other minor. The unusual notrump can never show spades.

Here are some examples:

Example 2

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North
1♥

East
??

South

West

You're sitting East with each of the following hands:

♠ 7 3
♥ 8
♦ A J 8 4 2
♣ K 10 9 7 4

Overcall 2NT with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both minors), and a weak hand.

♠ 7 3
♥ 8
♦ A K Q 4 2
♣ A K J 9 4

Overcall 2NT with this hand as well. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both minors), and a strong hand.

♠ 7 3
♥ 8
♦ A J 8 4 2
♣ K Q 9 7 4

Do not overcall 2NT with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both minors), but you have an intermediate hand. Remember: no two-suited overcalls with intermediate hands.

Example 3

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| North | East | South | West |
|---|------|-------|------|
| 1♠ | ?? | | |
| ♠ 7 3 ♥ 8 ♦ A J 8 4 2 ♣ K 10 9 7 4 | | | |

Overcall 2NT with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both minors), and a weak hand.

Let's see how the unusual notrump works when the opening bid is one of a minor:

Example 4**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

| North | East | South | West |
|---|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | ?? | | |
| ♠ 7 3 ♥ K 10 9 7 4 ♦ A J 8 4 2 ♣ 8 | | | |
| ♠ K 10 9 7 4 ♥ 7 3 ♦ A J 8 4 2 ♣ 8 | | | |

Overcall 2NT with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the two lower-ranking) and a weak hand.

Unless you use Ghestem, you cannot show this hand with a two-suited overcall. A 2NT bid would show the hand above, with hearts and diamonds, and a Michaels bid would show both majors. If you use Ghestem, overcall 3♣ to show the highest and lowest unbid suits.

Example 5**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

| North | East | South | West |
|---|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | ?? | | |
| ♠ 7 3 ♥ K 10 9 7 4 ♦ 8 ♣ A J 8 4 2 | | | |

Overcall 2NT with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the two lower-ranking) and a weak hand.

♠ K 10 9 7 4
 ♥ 7 3
 ♦ 8
 ♣ A J 8 4 2

Unless you use Ghestem, you cannot show this hand with a two-suited overcall. A 2NT bid would show the hand above, with hearts and clubs, and a Michaels bid would show both majors. If you use Ghestem, overcall 3♣ to show the highest and lowest unbid suits.

Michaels

Michaels is a cue bid of opener's suit in direct seat to show a two-suited hand (as described above).

- Over a minor suit opening, it always shows both major suits.
- Over a major suit opening, it always shows the other major plus an unknown minor.

Note: If you choose to use Ghestem, Michaels shows the following:

- Over a minor suit opening, it always shows both major suits. **This is always true whether you use Ghestem or not.**
- Over a major suit opening, it always shows the other major **plus diamonds** (in other words, the two higher-ranking unbid suits). In this case, Michaels specifies the precise minor suit held.

For simplicity, the following examples will only cover Michaels after a minor suit opening (Michaels always applies in this situation). Once we've covered Ghestem in more detail, we'll provide examples of Michaels (with and without Ghestem) over a major suit opening.

Example 6

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North
 1♣

East
 ??

South

West

You're sitting East with each of the following hands:

♠ A J 8 4 2
 ♥ K 10 9 7 4
 ♦ 7 3
 ♣ 8

Make a Michaels cue bid (2♣) with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both majors), and a weak hand.

♠ A K Q 4 2
♥ A K J 9 4
♦ 7 3
♣ 8

Make a Michaels cue bid (2♣) with this hand as well. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both majors), and a strong hand.

♠ A J 8 4 2
♥ K Q 9 7 4
♦ 7 3
♣ 8

Do not make a Michaels cue bid (2♣) with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both majors), but you have an intermediate hand. Remember: no two-suited overcalls with intermediate hands.

Example 7

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| | North | East | South | West |
|---|-------|------|--|------|
| | 1♦ | ?? | | |
| <p>♠ A J 8 4 2 ♥ K 10 9 7 4 ♦ 7 3 ♣ 8</p> | | | <p>Make a Michaels cue bid (2♦) with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (both majors), and a weak hand. You would also make the same Michaels cue bid with a strong hand, but not with an intermediate hand.</p> | |

Ghestem

Ghestem is an artificial (conventional) jump overcall of 3♣ to show a two-suited hand (as described above). Ghestem is optional, but it's valuable when used with Michaels to let partner know both your suits in one bid.

- Over a minor suit opening, it always shows spades plus the other minor (this combination cannot be shown with a single bid unless you use Ghestem).
- Over a major suit opening, it always shows the other major plus clubs (contrast this with Michaels, which always shows the other major plus diamonds when used with Ghestem).

Let's see how Michaels and the optional Ghestem bids work when the opening bid is one of a major:

Example 8

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| | North | East | South | West |
|--|-------|------|-------|------|
| | 1♥ | ?? | | |

♠ K 10 9 7 4
♥ 7 3
♦ A J 8 4 2
♣ 8

Cue bid 2♥ with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the other major, plus a minor) and a weak hand. If you don't use Ghestem, partner will not know which minor suit you hold (but he has a bid available to ask; we'll come to that later). Even if you use Ghestem, you would still use Michaels here to show the two higher-ranking unbid suits (spades and diamonds). A Ghestem bid (3♣) would show spades and clubs.

♠ K 10 9 7 4
♥ 7 3
♦ 8
♣ A J 8 4 2

If you use Michaels without Ghestem, cue bid 2♥ with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the other major, plus a minor) and a weak hand. If you don't use Ghestem, partner will not know which minor suit you hold (but he has a bid available to ask; we'll come to that later). If you use Ghestem, you would bid 3♣ to show the two highest and lowest unbid suits (spades and clubs).

Example 9

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North
1♠

East
??

South

West

♠ 7 3
♥ K 10 9 7 4
♦ A J 8 4 2
♣ 8

Cue bid 2♠ with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the other major, plus a minor) and a weak hand. If you don't use Ghestem, partner will not know which minor suit you hold (but he has a bid available to ask; we'll come to that later). Even if you use Ghestem, you would still use Michaels here to show the two higher-ranking unbid suits (hearts and diamonds). A Ghestem bid (3♣) would show hearts and clubs.

♠ 7 3
♥ K 10 9 7 4
♦ 8
♣ A J 8 4 2

If you use Michaels without Ghestem, cue bid 2♠ with this hand. You have the right distribution in the required suits (the other major, plus a minor) and a weak hand. If you don't use Ghestem, partner will not know which minor suit you hold (but he has a bid available to ask; we'll come to that later). If you use Ghestem, you would bid 3♣ to show the two highest and lowest unbid suits (hearts and clubs).

Responding To A Two–Suited Overcall

There are three rules when responding to your partner's two-suited overcall (regardless of which particular overcall it is):

1. Assume partner has a weak hand.
2. Respond only if you have to.
3. Always choose one of partner's suits (assuming you have to respond).

Use the following guidelines to choose one of partner's suits:

- If the two suits to choose from are unequal in length **choose the longer, regardless of strength.**
- If the two suits are equal in length choose the stronger.

Responding To The Unusual Notrump

If your right-hand opponent passes partner's unusual notrump bid, you must select one of partner's suits. You will always know which two suits partner holds, so make your choice based on the guidelines above.

Responding To Michaels

If your right-hand opponent passes partner's Michaels cuebid, you must select one of partner's suits.

- If partner bid Michaels over a minor suit opening, partner will always hold both majors. Make your choice based on the guidelines above.
- If partner bid Michaels over a major suit opening, partner will always hold the other major plus an unknown minor (assuming you do not use Ghestem). If you have support for partner's major (three cards or more), choose it. If you have no tolerance for partner's major, bid 2NT to tell partner to bid his minor suit. **This 2NT bid is entirely artificial; it does not mean you want to play notrump.**
- If partner bid Michaels over a major suit opening and you do use Ghestem, partner will always hold the other major plus diamonds (you don't have to ask with a 2NT bid). Make your choice based on the guidelines above.

Responding To Ghestem

If your right-hand opponent passes partner's Ghestem bid (3♣), you must select one of partner's suits.

- If partner bid Ghestem over a minor suit opening, partner will always hold spades plus the other minor. Make your choice based on the guidelines above.
- If partner bid Ghestem over a major suit opening, partner will always hold the other major plus clubs. Make your choice based on the guidelines above.

Here are some examples using Michaels. The same basic principles apply when responding to the other two-suited overcalls.

Example 10

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North

1♦

East

2♦

South

Pass

West

??

Partner has shown both major suits. You must bid, because your right-hand opponent has passed. If your right-hand opponent (South, in this diagram) had bid, you are off the hook. You would not have to bid in that case unless you really wanted to (you had a great fit for one or both of partner's suits). Choose between hearts and spades.

Example 11

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North

1♥

East

2♥

South

Pass

West

??

Partner has shown spades plus a minor suit. If you don't use Ghestem, you don't know which minor suit partner holds. If you do use Ghestem, you know that partner holds spades and diamonds.

- If you have three or more spades (partner's known major), choose that suit regardless of what minor suit partner holds, whether you know the minor suit or not.
- If you have two or fewer spades, but at least three cards in each minor, respond 2NT to find out partner's minor suit if necessary. If you already know partner's minor suit, then bid it.

What happens when you don't know partner's minor suit and you have a hand like this?

♠ 7
♥ K 10 9 7 4 2
♦ A J 8 4 2
♣ 8

What happens is that you want to crawl under the table. This is an example of the type of hand where Ghestem can help. Assuming you use Ghestem, you know that partner holds spades and diamonds (if he held spades and clubs, he would have bid 3♣ instead of 2♥). You can bid 3♦ with confidence.

When you don't know partner's minor suit, pass and pray. Don't bid 2NT hoping that partner has diamonds (trust me, he won't).

If you use Ghestem and partner has bid 3♣ (showing spades and clubs), crawl under the table again. Seriously though: pass and pray again. Hopefully the opponents will continue bidding.

Bidding Again With A Strong Hand

When you make a two-suited overcall on a **weak** hand, you have done all the bidding you will do on that hand (it's similar in concept to a preempt). You do not bid again regardless of whether partner does anything or not.

- **One exception:** When you use Michaels to show an unknown minor suit, partner may bid 2NT to ask for your minor. In that case (assuming opener passes), bid your minor. If opener bids over partner's 2NT asking bid, pass with a weak hand.

With a **strong** two-suited overcall, you are allowed (but not required) to bid again even if partner has passed. Let's look at some examples (in all cases, assume you have made a two-suited overcall with 16+ points):

Example 12

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 2♣ | Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | ?? | | |

With both opponents passing, there is a good chance that partner has a fair to good hand. Remember, partner is expecting you to be weak. Show partner your good hand by bidding 3♥. This is invitational to game (partner should accept with 9+ points, including distributional values).

Example 13

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 2♣ | 3♣ | Pass |
| Pass | ?? | | |

Responder has apparently frightened off your partner with his club raise. However, this club raise probably shows a weakish hand, and partner could still have a fair to good hand. Remember, partner is expecting you to be weak. Show partner your good hand by doubling. This **requires** partner to choose one of your suits (assuming South passes). Your partner should bid 3♥ or 3♠ holding less than nine points; with more, partner should bid game.

Example 14

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 2♣ | 2♦ | Pass |
| 2NT | ?? | | |

Responder has shown a good hand (10+ points), and opener has a minimum (12 to 14). Partner can't have a good hand or extreme distributional values (opener's 2NT bid claims that he has stoppers and some length in both your suits). Pass is probably best; you might even be able to set 2NT a trick or two.

Just For Laughs

You will probably never see an auction like this, but it did happen to me in a club game several years ago. I'll give the full auction; see if you can interpret the bids before you look at the explanations.

Example 15

North dealer, not sure about vulnerability

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 2♣ | 3♣ | 4♣ |
| 5♣ | 6♣ | Pass | 6♣ |

The 6♣ contract made. Let's look at each bid to see what it meant:

1♣: A normal opening bid.

2♣: A Michaels cuebid, showing both majors (at this point, it could be showing either a weak or a strong hand).

3♣: A club raise with a weak hand.

4♣: A cuebid, showing both majors with a strong hand (either in points or distribution, or both). Obviously, this bid is forcing to game in a major. West is making this bid not knowing whether East has a weak hand or a strong hand. West is hoping that East has a strong hand, but if not, the major suit sacrifice could be a good result.

5♣: A sacrifice against the expected E/W major suit game.

6♣: Surprise! I have a strong Michaels hand! Pick a major suit slam please.

6♠: Okay.

Intermediate Strength Hands

Throughout this article, we have emphasized that two-suited overcalls are not made with hands of intermediate strength (10 to 15 points). This has been the accepted wisdom among bridge players for almost as long as two-suited overcalls have existed.

The accepted way to show intermediate two-suited hands is to overcall in the higher-ranking suit first, and then bid your lower-ranking suit on your next turn. Assume you hold five spades and five hearts, eleven high card points, and your right-hand opponent opens 1♣. Here is an example of how the auction should go, according to accepted wisdom:

Example 16

North dealer, not sure about vulnerability

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass |
| Pass | 2♥ | Pass | ?? |

West now has an easy choice: he can pass 2♥ or correct to 2♠, depending on which suit he prefers. Accepted wisdom wins.

However, this accepted wisdom arose in the days when bridge bidding was more sedate than it is today. Back in the olden days, people were expected to have points when they bid. There wasn't as much consideration given to distributional values, sacrifices, etc. Nowadays, the above auction is likely to go like this:

Example 17

North dealer, not sure about vulnerability

| North | East | South | West |
|-------|------|--------------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 3♣ (weak) | Pass |
| Pass | ?? | | |

Should you bid 3♥ or not? It's true that South is showing a weak hand, but North could still have quite a good hand and pass. You have to guess whether 3♥ is right. If you guess right, you'll likely be okay. But if you guess wrong, you could end up with a poor result. Is there a better idea than guessing?

Heresy

The following idea is still considered heresy, but given the more preemptive styles of bidding that are common nowadays, it may work out for you:

When you have the distributional requirements for a two-suited overcall, make it with any range of high card points.

Do not adopt this heresy unless you and your partner agree to it.

An additional factor to consider if you adopt this heresy is: when can the overcaller make a second bid? So far this article states that 16+ points are required to bid a second time. If you adopt this heresy, go for

excommunication and change that rule to these ones:

1. If the opponents' bidding indicates that they have minimum hands (about 20 points or so between them), bid again if you hold 10 points or more.
2. If the opponents' bidding indicates that partner has a weak hand, only bid again with 16+ points, and only if you think it's a good idea.

Adopting this heresy will make the intermediate hands a bit of a muddle for both you and your opponents. But it does satisfy a few other principles that have been discussed in other articles:

- Shape beats points. When you hold a distributional hand, it's more important to describe the distribution than the strength. Partner will be more likely to do the right thing.
- Make the opponents guess last. Once you have shown your distribution (regardless of strength), you can generally relax. Your opponents have to guess what to do next.

[Top of Page](#)



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